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ABSTRACT

Containing 13 essays selected from teachers at many levels and from specialists in various branches of the English profession, this journal issue provides English teachers with the opportunity to answer the many charges currently being levelled at education. The opening article highlights the issues raised by the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This is followed by two commentaries on excellence in education, its goals and obstacles. The next essay urges teachers to make the public aware of the importance of their task and the centrality of their role as humanitarians. An essay on basic education questions whether the three R's are sufficient for the survival and full-growth potential of individuals in today's society. Another article warns English teachers against spreading themselves too thin. One contributor suggests that the educational priorities of our nation must be reevaluated, and states that education should be a privilege earned through capability and a desire to excel. Overcoming roadblocks in the composition classroom is the topic of another article and the responses of some college freshmen to "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" are summarized by one educator. The remaining articles survey a variety of obstacles that stand in the way of English teachers' performance--from an unsupportive American public to unreasonable class sizes. (HTH)

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ROADBLOCKS TO EXCELLENCE: ENGLISH TEACHERS SPEAK OUT!

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ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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OPINIONS FROM:

**Classroom Teachers
Past Presidents of NCTE
President of IATE
Chairperson of SLATE
Department Chairpersons**

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ROADBLOCKS TO EXCELLENCE: ENGLISH TEACHERS SPEAK OUT

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The purpose of this issue has been to provide English teachers the opportunity to speak out in answer to the many charges currently being levelled at education. To show a range of responses, essays have been selected from teachers at many levels — from junior high school through the community college and university, and from those specializing in various branches of the discipline — composition, business and technical writing, literature, and language, as well as administration.

The issue opens with an article by R. Baird Shuman, Director of English Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, since he so aptly highlights the central issues of the controversy, especially those raised by the report released last April from President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. His essay is followed by commentaries from two past presidents of the National Council of Teachers of English — William F. Irmscher and Alan C. Purves. Then the current president of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, Bruce Appleby, speaks out urging fellow teachers to make themselves heard in their own behalf to make the public aware of the importance of their task and the centrality of their role as humanitarians.

The articles that follow survey a variety of obstacles that stand in the way of an English teacher's performance — from an unsupportive American public to unreasonable class size.

I want to thank IATE members for their cooperation in the production of this issue, especially Mary Sasse and Bruce Appleby, whose enthusiastic appeals for opinions resulted in many fine articles.

Dorothy Matthews
Editor

Within A Budding Grove: America's Schools and the Nation At Risk Report

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When President Reagan's blue ribbon National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its report in April, 1983, a public that has pre-eternally used the schools as a whipping boy heard sentiments expressed about public education that quite confirmed its most jaundiced, and often uninformed, views of the schools and of their accomplishments. Some of the report's rhetoric verged on the hysterical: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Certainly such statements can emanate only from those who choose to overlook the accomplishments of the schools during some of the most cataclysmic times in American's social history.

The schools alone of social agencies were in the 1960s and early 1970s charged with the momentous task of bringing about racial integration. Long before open housing was a fact of life, more than a decade before the Public Accommodations Act was made law, the schools were under a legal mandate to accomplish far-reaching social tasks for which most of their teachers and administrators were unprepared and ill-equipped. In many situations, particularly those in the inner city and those in the rural South, the dual tasks of changing attitudes and of keeping even a modicum of classroom order presented educators with a full-time task. Added to these tasks was the expectation that learning would go on as usual. Such an expectation was, in the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, probably unrealistic.

Added to the social unrest of the period was the reality that compulsory school attendance, in most cases to age 16, had for several decades been in place and that such attendance laws had resulted in a school population that was infinitely more varied, particularly at the secondary level, than the school population around the turn of the century, when, indeed, it was expected that anyone leaving high school would not only be literate but would have met college entrance requirements, which were then identical to high school graduation requirements. When school attendance to age 16 was mandated, non-college bound students more commonly remained in high

school until graduation, and the high school curriculum, aided by legislation providing for vocational education and later for distributive education, was expanded drastically to meet the needs of a school population that was becoming increasingly diverse.

Social promotion, while perhaps not a wise pedagogical policy, was in many districts with highly complicated school populations deemed a necessity so that children who had not yet reached puberty would not be intermingled with students who had long since reached it. The junior high school became perhaps the most challenging teaching situation because it was there that teachers were constantly being made aware of the force of rampaging hormones within the confines of a school setting. To have retained students in elementary school because they could not read and write well would have been to intermix 15 and 16 year old students, mostly boys, with 10 and 11 year old students, and few schools were equipped to handle the social problems that such an intermixture would inevitably have generated. Few teachers felt good about social promotion, but because they were on the firing line, they saw it as a necessary trade-off.

The Report and Schools

For all of its imperfections, the Nation at Risk Report calls for a number of reforms that teachers themselves have been calling for over the years. The Report has been so widely distributed and commented upon that public awareness of education's needs has been heightened significantly by it. It is not excessive to predict that partly as a reaction to the Report and to the ensuing publicity and discussion it has engendered, the public today is more likely than at any time in the last half century, save during the years immediately following the Soviet launching of Sputnik, to respond favorably to calls for public support of schools through increased taxation. Even in the year or two immediately before the Report, society seemed to be moving in this direction. In Michigan, which was under dire financial constraints in 1982-83 because of the soft economy and the slow-down in the automobile industry, "Ninety percent of all school tax renewal proposals were approved."¹ Kentucky has just elected as governor Martha Collins, a former teacher who strongly supports improvement in education, and Mississippi has put into office William Allain, who has a strong record of support for education.² Allain's predecessor, William Winter, "got the legislature to pass a \$69 million bill last December to improve teacher pay and to implement compulsory attendance for the first time since the 1950s."³ In Florida, the legislature passed a \$228 million school reform bill in

June, 1983, two months after the Nation at Risk Report was issued. The timing seems more than coincidental.

Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee recently has proposed a master teacher plan which would cost his state \$115 million and which would provide for four categories of teacher — apprentice, professional teacher, senior teacher, and master teacher.⁴ Perhaps this proposal is one of the most important made in public education of late because it attacks a problem endemic to the teaching profession at the pre-collegiate level, which TheodoreSizer, former Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and later principal of Phillips Academy, Andover, articulates: "The teaching profession has a very limited career line. A teacher has roughly the same responsibility at the end of a professional lifetime as on the first day of work."⁵ The Tennessee proposal would mandate differentiated staffing and should result in making it possible for successful, experienced teachers to have an increasing hand in school management and in teacher training.

The Commission's Recommendations

The National Commission on Excellence in Education made essentially five recommendations. It called for a secondary school curriculum that would require four years of high school English, three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies, and one-half year of computer science. It strongly recommends two years of a foreign language for all students planning to continue to college. This recommendation focuses on the basics and is somewhat in keeping with what Sizer calls for: "In most high schools, a shorter, simpler, better-defined list of goals is necessary; this will involve shelving the long-standing claims of certain subject areas. For example, driver education may have to give way to English."⁶ The public now seems ready to accept this change in emphasis; and school districts seem increasingly willing to provide it.

The Commission calls for more rigorous grades and standards at all levels of education and suggests that at various points in their educational progress, all students be subjected to standardized tests which measure them against national norms. As part of this upgrading, the Commission requests that college admission standards be raised and that textbooks be reexamined closely for their rigor and accuracy. These recommendations are quite general. Sizer would go one step beyond them in suggesting that "students entering high school unable to read, write, or cipher adequately will have to concentrate exclusively on these subjects. These are the foundations

of secondary school work, and, until they are mastered, studying much else is wasteful."⁷ He also calls for the schools to emphasize high order thinking skills. The latter cry is heard quite universally in educational circles nowadays even to the point that J. Michael Bishop, professor of microbiology and immunology at the University of California Medical Center has warned the Association of American Medical Colleges recently that what emerges from medical schools "are physicians without inquiring minds, physicians who bring to the bedside *not* curiosity and a desire to understand, but a set of reflexes that allows them to earn a handsome living." Bishop goes on to implore, "Faculty members should be teaching 'habits of mind, more than anything else, a zest for learning in all its many guises,' . . . noting that many studies have shown that even the best graduates forget factual knowledge very quickly."⁸

The Commission's third recommendation is a quantitative one. It suggests a lengthening of the school day to seven hours and of the school year to anywhere from 200 to 220 school days from the present 180. This is perhaps the most questionable of all the recommendations. More time in school might be desirable for those with learning difficulties in the basic skills; but it is estimated that the full implementation of this recommendation would cost between \$7 and \$20 billion each year nationally, and little research exists to suggest that positive educational benefits would be derived from it.⁹

The National Center for Educational Statistics, which suggests that the lower figure would be needed to lengthen the school day and the school year, is generally quite conservative in its predictions. It is unlikely that it has taken into full account the fact that many schools are not equipped to operate in the hottest months of the year, and that air conditioning them would add substantially to the figure projected, as would the increased utility bills that such a change would necessitate.

The fourth recommendation calls for changes that would move toward making teaching more professional. It would raise the requirements for teacher certification, leading probably to a fifth year of preparation for would-be teachers. It would bring entry level salaries into line with those of comparable occupations, requiring an average immediate \$4,867 (35.1%) increase nationally for entry level teachers from a present entry level salary of \$13,853 to \$18,720 annually, and it would put teachers on an 11-month contract, thereby increasing their overall salaries by another 9-10%. The salary increase alone could cost up to \$20 billion annually, plus the additional sums needed to implement the 11-month contracts. The Report also calls for merit increases, which would add considerably to the total expenditure.

The Commission's fifth recommendation calls for educational administrators, particularly school principals and superintendents of school, to play leadership roles in generating support, both moral and financial, for educational reform, and it calls for state and local officials to "incorporate the reforms we propose in their educational policies and fiscal planning." President Reagan, who applauded the Nation at Risk Report was clear in saying that more federal funds for education are not the answer, and only recently has he backed off reluctantly from dismantling totally the U.S. Department of Education.¹⁰ His sentiments are clearly opposed to increasing the federal role in school financing.

The politics of the Report are obvious to any savvy reader. However, its findings have helped to draw the public conscience, already deeply involved with problems of education, into the matter of school reform as seldom has happened before on a national level. Other reports, some of them more balanced and more informed than the Nation at Risk Report, are also being broadly disseminated. Probably the most sensible of these is the report that Ernest Boyer, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, recently produced under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. It is entitled *High School/A Report on Secondary Education in America*.

Boyer calls for a broad liberal arts orientation for those preparing to teach in high schools, and the admission to teacher preparation programs only of those with B averages in their first two years of college. Their college majors would be in an academic discipline rather than in education, and their programs would not be completed until a fifth year of "instructional and apprenticeship experience" had been completed.¹¹ Boyer calls for teachers to have fewer classes, more preparation time, paid leaves for professional enhancement, help in dealing with such routine matters as patrol duty in halls, restrooms, and cafeterias as well as in the paper work involved in teaching, and much more opportunity to work with students individually or in small groups, the situation in which the best learning is thought to take place.

The Message for English Teachers Present and Future

Central to every suggestion for educational reform has been a clarification call to put increased emphasis on skills that are generally taught by English teachers, essentially those of literacy and, more recently, of reasoning as well. People from most academic disciplines seem to support solidly the idea that if students cannot communicate effectively, they cannot succeed in any of their other academic pursuits.

English teachers have seldom been in a stronger position than they are now, although they must realize that the kind of English training currently being called for is not necessarily the kind of English training they have been educated to deliver. The emphasis in educational circles presently is on the skills of communication, and teachers who have been trained well in the teaching of writing and in language will be best able to meet the most immediate and pressing needs of their students.

The tradition that English teachers be trained essentially as literature teachers has to be altered. This is not to say that literature is unimportant; some of the highest level reasoning skills are products of intelligent explorations and interpretation of literature. But the day is fast disappearing when one will be able to call him — or herself an English teacher on the basis of having taken ten or twelve literature courses with only one course in writing beyond the freshman level and one or two courses in modern descriptive grammar and in history of the language. Society will soon demand that English teachers in the pre-collegiate setting be more fully trained in teaching writing and in language.

English teachers also will be expected to have much more training than most of them presently receive in how to teach students to speak effectively and to listen accurately and well. For too long it has been taken for granted that because students generally enter school able to speak and to listen, instruction in these two skills must be secondary to instruction in the two areas which most pre-schoolers have not mastered, reading and writing. Mastery of all four of these communication skills is crucially important to students, and fundamental to all of these skills is the ability to think and to reason and to solve problems.

The schools cannot change drastically until teacher education changes. If it does not change fast enough in colleges and universities, then it will take place elsewhere; teachers will be trained more in schools than in colleges and universities, and if such a relocation comes ever to be the case, the liberal education of teachers will suffer as immediate needs and ends are addressed and achieved.

The recent reports on the state of education in the United States have focused public attention on schools and have created a climate from which the teaching profession can now move toward achieving better results than ever before. Current educators find themselves within a budding grove, to borrow a term from Marcel Proust. If they capitalize on current public sentiment, the future of education

in the United States will be golden and the grove will come into profuse bloom. If educators fail to move, the locus of teacher training may well be shifted with the end result that schools will become much more narrow and restricted in their focus than is needful or desirable.

FOOTNOTES

¹"The Bold Quest for Quality," *Time*, 122 (October 10, 1983), p. 59.

²*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 (November 16, 1983), p. 14.

³"The Bold Quest for Quality," *Time*, 122 (October 10, 1983), p. 60.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵"High School Reform: The Need for Engineering," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 64 (June 1983), p. 681.

⁶Sizer, *op. cit.*, p. 682.

⁷Sizer, *op. cit.*, p. 682.

⁸Cheryl M. Fields, "Medical Students Said to Fear Science; Applications to Schools Fall Slightly," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 (November 16, 1983), p. 13. Fields' *italics*.

⁹"Longer Year, Higher Pay To Be Costly, Study Says," *Education Week*, 3 (October 12, 1983), pp. 1, 19.

¹⁰"Report on Excellence in Education Acclaimed; Panelists Criticize Reagan's Interpretation," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 (May 11, 1983), pp. 1, 10.

¹¹Albert Shanker, "A Prescription for Our High Schools," *On Campus*, 3 (November 1983), p. 5.

Toward Excellence

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I do a bit of running, not fanatically like some people — just a bit to keep some of the kinks out and to slough off that heavy feeling that comes from sitting too long at a desk. Around the University of Washington, there are various directions in which you can run, very pleasant trails that extend perhaps twelve or thirteen miles. The problem is that anybody wanting to do less must simply run a certain distance, turn around, and then run back. Running to Foster Island is different, however. It is a specific destination. You run out there over a narrow causeway, lined on both sides by marsh grasses and lily pads. Birds nest there. Water laps the sides of the causeway and sometimes spills over. It is a pleasant run. It's an escapist run. But there are problems. It is not always easy running out to Foster Island as it is on the trails. Things get in the way, things that bring you back to reality. On a summer's day, hordes of pesky insects set up a screen. But they're easy to run through if you flail your arms. They are just an annoyance, not an obstacle. And then there are the occasional and unexpected rocks. If you happen to step on one, you can hurt yourself. Puddles, too, are messy and threatening. But, despite interferences of this kind on the causeway, I suppose the major obstacle is oneself. If you don't have the breath and the endurance, you're not going to make it. You have to keep pushing for Foster Island. But the trees loom up ahead. They lure you on. You have to get that far. That's your destination. You can see it. Running to Foster Island is different from just running until you think you have gone as far as you can and then give up. Destinations are important. What destinations do English teachers have? You can set your own goals, of course, but for this occasion let's use the objective that has been set for us by a plethora of reform studies recently published and publicized: restoring excellence to the high school curriculum. The positive challenges we set for ourselves are directly related to the negative challenges by those outside the profession. The negative must be made positive. I want to point out some of the things that get in our way: annoyances, threats, major obstacles. What I would like to do is to help you see your own concerns and activities in a larger context. When I attended a meeting recently, one high school teacher expressed her sense of isolation and loneliness, her sense of not knowing whether the things that were happening in her class-

room and in her department and in her school were in any way typical of what was happening in others. Often one of the major advantages of coming to a professional meeting is to find out that others share the same concerns you have, and you can talk together. I have always thought that more benefits are derived from conversation that takes place over a cup of coffee or a drink than those that come from the sessions or the featured speakers.

One of the things that the presidency of the National Council offers an individual during the four-year period of service is an opportunity to assume a national perspective, to see issues as part of a larger whole, much as we see the continent daily on satellite photos. Clearly, we don't see the detail of Macomb or Detroit or Tucson, but we see those larger fronts and currents that will affect us tomorrow and the next day. I therefore want to address some of those larger issues.

Perhaps the single most important threat to excellence in the teaching of English is the increasing wave of censorship. What is at issue, of course, is the intellectual freedom essential for learning, not learning from just a limited narrow view, but learning by subjecting students to a broad spectrum of ideas and preparing them to become self-sufficient adults who are capable of making decisions for themselves about the way they will live their lives. What is at issue is the students' right to know. The phrase "the students' right to know" is the title of a very fine NCTE publication by Lee Burress and Edward Jenkinson. This 47-page booklet condenses into brief form the major issues about censorship. It appraises why censorship is increasing, honestly admitting that some teachers have not always chosen materials wisely, and some teachers and administrators have not been consistently willing to pay attention to protests by parents. What is clear is that we need to educate ourselves to prevent confrontations. We need to build bridges, reminding ourselves that bridges are two-way affairs.

What is also at issue in censorship is the accessibility of materials that will engage students, that will prompt them to think and talk and write. More than 300 groups throughout the United States are now organized to protest the content of textbooks, fueled mainly by the guidelines and reviews distributed by Norma and Mel Gabler in Texas. Since the Gablers strongly influence the state adoption of books in Texas and a Texas adoption is crucial to the market success of any school publication, the standards of Texas have become the standards of the nation. Editors of secondary texts are willing to grind out books based on market needs, assuming that books pieced together to meet market needs will meet educational needs. That is a fallacy. Books written for high schools today cannot discuss or even

suggest sex in any form. No drugs, no alcoholism, no violence, no sadness, no depression, no death, no controversial figures, and they must not include anything too creative or innovative—in brief, almost anything that might possibly interest, involve, and engage young adults in a serious way. The most representative theme topic for Grades 9-12 is "My favorite kind of pizza is . . ." In recent years, the names of some of the young people referred to in these books have been changed to Consuela and Juan, but whether the faces are black or brown or white, they are still all the happy teenagers of middle class society, none of whom, of course, ever commits suicide. It is no wonder that when some of these students reach college and get a dose of modern literature, they complain about the pervasive dreariness of it. They have been living in a world of textbook illusion.

The National Council has an active committee against censorship. Last year, the Executive Committee voted to expend more money to fight censorship, inviting the Committee against Censorship to submit proposals that will train people in strategic areas, establish a network of communication so that local groups are not operating in isolation, and in general to send out a censorship ALERT.

The Committee has now proposed to go to the heart of the action. It will hold a special conference in Texas in the spring of 1984 to bring together representatives of that state's numerous affiliates in an effort to encourage them to join a coalition with other interested groups to protect intellectual freedom in Texas and, in particular, to influence in a positive way selection of texts in that state. Last year, People for the American Way sent representatives to selection-board hearings and for the first time successfully challenged the usual proceeding of prohibiting rebuttals.

State affiliates can support the efforts of the national committee by collecting data on censorship cases and the actions taken to resolve the disputes. They can set up their own network to lend support to teachers and schools under attack. All of us need to realize that the tradition of free thought in this society is actually at stake. If the libraries and classrooms of this nation are being decimated by self-appointed but powerful censors, then we need to act, because books are our business, and freedom of thought is one of our central concerns.

A second major threat to accomplishing our professional objectives is a loss of status in the eyes of the public. Much of that is attributable to the decline of test scores over a period of years, to reduced course requirements, lax standards, and to the much publicized conditions of violence and vandalism in the schools. Public confidence in English teaching has declined in recent years. At the same time, Milton Goldberg has observed, "Much that is good in the schools goes

unnoticed and unpublicized." The most recently published high school study, the Carnegie report, acknowledges that all is not bad in the schools. The fact remains, however, that a credibility gap exists between the profession and the public. If we are doing some things well, then we are doing a poor public relations job of asserting what we are capable of doing. The National Commission on Excellence has gone so far as to declare the "nation at risk" from the "rising tide of mediocrity." Those phrases may be somewhat overdramatized, but the special studies and the press have declared a crisis. Whether or not you share the findings, the status of the profession suffers. The image of the English teacher has diminished.

The Executive Committee of the National Council has appointed a committee, entitled the Committee on the Profession and the Public, to study the problem. Its charge is to examine the profession's present image before the public and recommend how the profession's case can be effectively presented and, conversely, how the profession can more effectively listen to and comprehend expressions of public dissatisfaction with English teachers. Once again, the task is building bridges, not fighting battles.

What *are* the obstacles to our doing a better job of teaching English? In trying to answer, we have to recognize that some conditions are within our control; some are not. For the most part, we are victims when school levies fail, when the economic crisis forces reduction of staff and larger classes. We who continue to apply our best efforts to the teaching of English are victims when other teachers are misassigned to do a job they are not prepared to do. Many English teachers themselves are inadequately prepared by the colleges and universities, which are by no means exempt from responsibility.

Probably nothing is more crucial to the teaching of English than the quality of persons who teach. Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has said, "The teaching profession is caught in a vicious cycle, spiraling downward. Rewards are few, morale is low, the best teachers are bailing out and the supply of good recruits is drying up." It is estimated that there is a present balance of supply and demand for English teachers, with perhaps a modest shortage developing in two or three years. But the profession is attracting fewer and fewer of the best minds, and many young women, who in the past represented a consistent source of good teachers, now have more attractive alternatives open to them.

But in acknowledging that there are many social, political, and economic conditions beyond our control, we must also acknowledge that some are within our control, some that we as teachers can address through continuing education and in-service training. I refer to

those English teachers who don't care, those who are indifferent to the scholarship of the discipline, those who want no change from formulaic, easy-to-teach methods. Indifferent teachers now represent such a mass that they are the ones who are determining largely what publishers will publish or not publish. The choices that publishers make on the basis of what *they* say teachers want is a cynical commentary on English teachers. If a book departs too radically from what the buying audience wants, it won't sell widely. If a book takes a new approach, it is high risk. The circularity of so-called demand and publishing is responsible for actually retarding the discipline. School departments in publishing houses conduct vast marketing surveys to determine what teachers, including the unprepared ones, want. These surveys result in the "obligatories"—a term used to indicate those things that have to be in a book no matter how outmoded, unreasonable, or misguided they might be. This is a system that perpetuates ignorance. But teachers could control it if they understood more fully what goes on.

I estimate that it takes anywhere from ten to fifteen years for a new concept or approach to filter down to the teaching level and find its way into school texts. Some of Francis Christensen's work on the cumulative sentence, for instance, published in 1966, is just beginning to be fairly widely known. The lag time is an outgrowth of an uninformed audience of teachers who still ask for simplistic, easy-to-teach, easy-to-test materials. As a consequence, the majority of texts, both at the secondary level and Freshman college level, remain out-of-date, unchallenging, and dull. One of the secrets of staying alive professionally is to tap new sources of knowledge as a way of maintaining one's own resourcefulness. In this regard, those who attend meetings and belong to professional organizations are not the problem. The problem is those who would not attend or read a journal even if they were subsidized. We must no longer try to cover up for them as if they don't exist and influence the status of the profession.

I would like to talk about one final challenge to the integrity of our discipline. I refer to it as Multiplication and Subtraction. Two forces are at work. By Multiplication I mean expanding the English curriculum to the extent that its essential nature becomes obscured, and we ourselves are no longer quite certain what the role of the English teacher is. The English classroom can easily become the catchall for any topic that someone thinks needs to be addressed: health, drug abuse, career-planning, social behavior, computers. You can make your own list. The elective system of recent years has also multiplied options.

By Subtraction I mean the tendency to reduce English studies to a limited list of objectives that address themselves almost exclusively to

basic competencies. These two forces are polar opposites.

Perhaps the most lamentable result of the Subtraction movement has been to neglect literature as an absolutely essential part of English studies. Almost every English teacher I have known was first attracted to the subject through the literature. Perhaps later they learned the fascination of language study and the creativeness of composing but the literature initially prompted a natural, intuitive response. In our zeal for literacy and writing proficiency, we have unbalanced the English curriculum by diminishing the importance of literature. We need to reassert it, for as English teachers we derive our intellectual authority by being able to speak on matters of language, literature, and communication, not other issues. If we repudiate the tradition of language and literature, we lose our intellectual authority.

These remarks indicate quite clearly my own belief that language and literature are the core of our discipline. What specifically does an English teacher do that is identifiably different from what social studies or mathematics teachers do? All teachers are in some way involved in training students to think and to cope with the experience of learning, both in school and outside. But what does the study of English contribute to an individual's ability to become self-sufficient and to lead a productive life?

This monumental question is precisely the one we asked ourselves when the National Council set out to produce a document entitled "The Essentials of English." Let me give you a bit of background. In 1979, the Council joined eleven other professional associations to reaffirm the value of a balanced education by endorsing a document entitled "The Essentials of Education." That statement was in part a response to the public's concern about basic knowledge. "The Essentials of Education" acknowledges that all advanced development is dependent upon basic development, but cautions that simplistic solutions can be ruinous to the educational system. If schools emphasize basics only in the narrowest sense of the word, if they test only for minimal competencies, if teachers are held accountable primarily for survival skills, if schools function only in low gear, then they will fail to prepare students for a highly technological and complex society that demands much more. In an age of information, the higher thinking skills are more important than ever before. A passage from "The Essentials of Education" reads:

The interdependence of skills and content is the central concept of the essentials of education. Skills and abilities do not grow in isolation from content. In all subjects, students develop skills in using language and other symbol systems; they develop the ability to reason; they undergo experiences that lead to emotional and social maturity.

The document ends: "*Everyone* has a stake in the essentials of education." The number of organizations now subscribing to "The Essentials of Education" has grown to twenty-four. Supporting organizations have been urged to write their own "Essentials." After more than two years of work and multiple revisions, the National Council of Teachers of English has its own statement. It was printed in the section journals for February 1983 and is available in brochure form from the headquarters office in Urbana, Illinois. Up to fourteen copies will be sent free.

The Essentials is subtitled "A Document for Reflection and Dialogue," a choice of words that suggests that not everyone will agree with what they find in the document, but we hope that it will provide a point of departure for thought and discussion. It is intended to establish the identity and unity of the discipline and offset what I have already referred to as dilution by including too much. It is also an attempt to reclaim English as a body of knowledge about language and literature in the same sense that chemistry, history, and mathematics represent a body of knowledge. We are not just teachers of skills.

The fact that the "Essentials" has been completed is an accomplishment in itself. Since I was in charge of the final revision process, I know what differences had to be negotiated. At one point, someone simply recommended that I abandon the effort and acknowledge that English teachers have irreconcilable views about the discipline. I wasn't willing to do that. One of the major problems in formulating the statement was the tendency of teachers who were consulted to substitute the question "What do we do in English?" for the question "What are the essentials of English?" These are two quite different questions. Trying to determine the essentials does not necessarily repudiate other things that may be done in the English classroom, but it does try to identify a core that serves to differentiate our discipline from others. We are not just teachers; we are English teachers. In these days of cutting back, what would you cut from all of the things you do under the rubric of English or Language Arts if you were forced to and still wanted to preserve the integrity of the discipline? What you had left would be the essentials. To illustrate, the report of the National Commission on Excellence reads as follows:

The teaching of English in high school should equip graduates to: (a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read; (b) write well-organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d) know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to the customs, ideas, and values of today's life and culture.

"The Essentials of English" makes almost exactly the same statement, placing greater emphasis, however, on language and thinking skills. Our own document was approved in October 1982. The report of the Commission was published in April 1983. I emphasize the dates because as a professional organization we had anticipated the focus in English studies that is now being called for. In such ways, the National Council needs to lead, not follow.

Although the development of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking is a lifelong process, it is the English teacher who helps students become literate, who directs them to read materials appropriate to their interests and abilities, who encourages them to exchange ideas, listen perceptively, and discuss vigorously, who urges them to write honestly in the spirit of open inquiry, and who helps them expand their interests and reach their fullest potential through language. It is my hope that "The Essentials of English" will help restore a balance we need in English studies, provide a focus, and give us a clearer view of our destination ahead.

At the beginning when I wrote of running, I pointed out that often the major obstacle is oneself. That is true of teaching too. It requires energy and endurance. Burnout occurs when the stresses offset the rewards and we lose sight of destinations ahead. But we have all had the experience of knowing that the effort is worthwhile if we get where we're going. I must urge English teachers to keep running. Keep teaching. Keep looking ahead with the determination that we will revitalize the teaching of English.

Stalking the Aisles of the Educational Supermarket

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If one reads the various reports on schools that appeared in 1983, one is tempted to become depressed. Although there are clear pockets of excellence in American schools, there seem to be so many forces acting to prevent excellence from becoming widespread. I will not recite the litany of problems besetting teachers and school administrators, rather I will focus on one aspect of the English language arts curriculum that I think can be improved with some effort by a group of teachers who are willing to expend the time.

English teachers at all levels suffer from a materials glut. There are at least four competing textbook series for every aspect of the subject and there are hundreds of supplementary kits, ditto masters, transparency sets, and tests. In addition, the professional journals come out with issue after issue of suggestions for classroom practices, and the National Council of Teachers of English has recently added a quarterly of teaching tips. It is an information explosion, and the problem for many busy teachers is that they have little way of telling what is good or what is bad.

As I have looked over these materials and ideas, I am struck by the fact that they are presented without a context. By that I mean that the ideas for a lesson or the preprinted quizzes are not designed for a particular class or a particular community. They appear mass-produced, even though they may appear to have a designer label. But more than that lack of context, they generally lack any grounding in theory. The lesson tips and the materials seldom tell you why these might form a part of your curriculum. You are told that they work, but you are not told what they are supposed to do, where they fit into the curriculum, what they will do for students (except keep them quiet for an hour) or how these might promote better performance in English. If you put them all together, you would have as much a sense of an orderly curriculum as you would have a sense of a complete house from a Lillian Vernon catalogue.

This is not to say that the ideas and materials are necessarily bad, or that they cannot serve a curriculum, but their proliferation places a needless burden on a teacher to try to figure out why and where and which, and many teachers simply assume that any one is just as good as any other. Those teachers who cook and read the recipe

pages in the newspaper develop a keen sense of which recipes to save. Their decisions are based on a sense of what they and their family will eat, a sense of what is nutritious, a sense of what is interesting, a sense of what can be done with how much effort. How can teachers develop this same sense about curriculum materials and ideas for teaching?

One way for a group of teachers or a department to deal with the question is to make up a set of guidelines for the adoption of materials and ideas. It might be best if this were done on a district-wide basis so that there could be articulation among the school levels. This set of guidelines should answer these questions:

1. Who are the students? What sorts of people are they? What sorts of aspirations do they have? What are their interests?

2. What does our community expect from us? What view of the importance of the language arts does it have?

3. What is our view of the language arts? What ideas about language do we share about literature, about reading, writing, speaking and listening? What do we see as signs of learning and maturity? What habits do we want to encourage? What skills do we want to develop? What knowledge do we want our students to have? What attitudes about language and the uses of language do we want them to have?

4. Can we convert the answers to these questions into a set of goals?

5. Can we move from these goals to an outline of the learning standards for each grade? Can we create a meaningful sequence? As we do that, have we forgotten the necessity of repetition and spiralling?

6. Having specified the answers to these questions, can we pinpoint the kinds of activities—individual, small group, whole class, reading, writing, speaking, listening—that would support and enhance the learning standards?

If a school can answer these questions, it can provide its teachers with a filter for looking at the various materials and suggestions that come along. Let us suppose that an issue of a journal comes out with a suggestion for having a class do a dramatic interpretation of "Jabberwocky." The suggestion does not indicate at what grade level, in what context, for what students, or why the exercise should be done. It is simply reported as having worked, but we do not know what "working" meant. We think it sounds like a possibility, but instead of rushing into class and having the students try it, and having many of them be bored or think we are crazy, we can use the guidelines to put the lesson into a context. We might see that the exercise would call for students to show that they can figure out the meaning of new words by their grammar and context. This suggests that we

might include the exercise in a language unit, possibly as a way of indicating that a knowledge of grammatical terms has some use in reading.

We have now placed a partial context around the lesson, but there is more. The exercise would demand that the students already know the names of the major parts of speech. It suggests that successful students would be able to see that *vorpel* is an adjective, but they must also be able to see from context that it is probably not something like *rusty* or *dull*. That suggests that the exercise would follow some instruction on connotation and context clues, and that it might be placed in a unit dealing with that topic. It is clearly a whole-class activity. We have now begun to pin-point where in our curriculum the lesson might fit. We also see that we need to make clear to the students why they are being asked to undertake this activity. We are now ready to try it out and perhaps with some fair chance of success. We can measure its success both by how easily the students appear to interpret the poem and how much they were able to reason why they came up with their interpretation. We might also see that this exercise is useful only with certain groups of students, probably those who are already fairly good readers, whom we want to bring along to the stage of analytic or critical reading. We might want to follow it with another poem with somewhat obscure but real vocabulary and where the use of grammar and context can help students determine the meaning. It might fit well with a poem by Dylan Thomas or E. E. Cummings.

What we have done with this assignment, we can do with textbooks or sets of supplemental materials or computer programs. In our profession we are constantly bombarded with products we ought to try. Our journals and catalogs have as much hype and even less order than a supermarket's shelves. Just as we know when we go into a supermarket approximately what we are looking for because we have a menu and a means of accepting or rejecting the various products proffered, so we should have the same sort of plan in our head before we look at a journal or a catalog. English lessons are packaged like TV dinners, but we need to look carefully at the ingredients and at our diet before we select them.

It takes some work and some planning, but if in each of our schools and each of our courses we can develop a set of guidelines for dealing with the plethora of materials and ideas that beset us, we might improve the learning of our students. It is clear that those who offer these products to us do so in fairly good faith, but we have to make our own decisions, and we should do so rationally.

The Last Great Humanitarians

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In his short story "Jack Schmidt on the Burning Sands," A 'Jack Schmidt, Arts Administrator' Adventure," Garrison Keillor tells of a character who felt so bad about his situation that he says, "I had hit bottom, the depths, the Zasu Pitts, the Rudy Vallee, the utter Ralph Nader of my existence." (*Happy to Be Here*, Penguin Books, 1983)

Our sense of despondency when we look at how the media are portraying English teachers and how politicians are using us might lead to feeling what Keillor has described. In a less pessimistic vein, the emphasis on excellence in teaching English that forms the theme of this issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin* reminds me of an article I wrote several years ago which looked at the problems we have in teaching writing and some of the ways around these problems. I titled that article, "There Is No Solution. Seek It Lovingly."

The article suggested that there are no easy answers to the questions we have, for the humanitarian principles we espouse and the subjects we teach do not lend themselves to simple and facile solutions. But it is in this fact—that English does not consist of "yes and no" answers—that we find our strength. Language and its centrality to our existence as human beings is what fascinates us. It cannot be reduced to a set of simple rules. Human interaction as facilitated by language is vastly intricate. What attracts us to our discipline is the challenge to make our students aware of the nuances of language and the human complexities that language presents.

The answer is not in finding a solution. The answer is in seeking a solution. The desire to understand what language is and the need to make our students aware of the power of language make what we do and what we are become more and more important—to our students and to the public, which we must educate as well.

English teachers, particularly at the secondary level, are the last great humanitarians. If there is an opportunity for people to realize the centrality of language to all human behavior, then that opportunity for the majority in our culture must be met in the secondary schools. It is through English teachers that most people come to learn of the arts and of letters. In no other subject are so many exposed to the possibilities of what language is and can be. It doesn't take a statistician to tell us that the great majority of high school graduates are never again going to look at language and its use in that unique

way they experience in the high school English classroom. For a great many, the English class may be the last time in their lives where writers and their impact will be discussed and analyzed. It may be the last time they will look at artists and what artists do. The unfortunately low enrollments in music, drama, and art classes are evidence of this. When we add to this the fact that those students who do go on to further their education beyond high school can often do so without ever taking a literature course, then we see why, as the last great humanitarians, high school English teachers are so vastly important to the maintenance and the future of our culture.

In the recent Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching study *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* (Harper & Row, 1983), Boyer points out that English should be the first and most essential goal of education for all students. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, in *A Nation At Risk*, placed development of the ability to use language first among its recommendations for the content of high school education. Boyer goes on to say that since writing is so central a skill, a skill so significant that it is more important than all other skills taught in school, teachers of writing must receive special attention — smaller and fewer classes, the best materials, inservice training, and help through writing across the curriculum. Boyer states: "Clear writing leads to clear thinking and clear thinking is the basis of clear writing . . . writing holds us responsible for our words and ultimately makes us more thoughtful human beings."

Boyer gives us an almost frightening charge when he says, "The effective use of English is absolutely crucial. Those who do not become proficient in the primary language of the culture are enormously disadvantaged in school and out of school. During high school every student, not just those with problems, should learn to write more clearly, read with greater discrimination, speak with more precision and, through critical thinking, develop the capacity to apply old knowledge to new concepts."

In the 25 years I have been teaching English, I have seen so many ups and downs, so many ins and outs, so many fads and trends that the center seems at times lost. Boyer directs us back to the center: the absolute need for the children of our culture to have the means to think clearly and to express themselves clearly. The English language arts are the nurturing medium for the knowledgeable, skillful, and literate citizens we need, citizens capable of helping themselves and leading others to productive humanitarian lives.

William Irmscher, Past President of NCTE, reminded us in his talk at our state convention last fall that there is much that is good in our English classrooms that goes unnoticed and unpublicized. We

are now starting to understand that it is we who must publicize and bring to the public notice of what we do.

A while back, I wrote to the teachers of the Illinois students who were honored by the NCTE Achievement Award Program. I congratulated them on their work and asked them to please share with other English teachers in Illinois, through this issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin*, what they do and how they do it since their experience might be able to help others realize pathways to excellence. Several of the articles in this issue are by teachers who have had these outstanding students. In the letters sent me by some of the teachers, the one consistency I note is love for language. Jane Beem of Zion, commenting on the work done by her student Robb Haugh, said that Robb has an exceptional love for language. It was only through the testing programs and the encouragement of teachers like Mrs. Beem that Robb began to realize that he has an unusual gift with language. As Mrs. Beem said in a letter, "I spent two years pumping up his confidence; now these high scores are confirming his ability."

Ben Loyd, of Meridian Community Unit District, wrote that he was flattered to be asked for advice about how to teach writing. Again, he pointed out that his experience suggested "... good writers are good readers. The reader that has the capacity to understand and thoughtfully formulate what he has read can also thoughtfully formulate what he wishes to say. Slipshod writing results from slipshod thinking." Mr. Loyd goes on to say that if he had made any contribution, he suspects that his "... rather passionate concern for ideas and relationships may have encouraged some students to see, think, and express themselves with clarity and precision. The flowing sentence, the apt expression, the well termed phrase come easily to those who know what to say." As Mr. Loyd's writing well demonstrates, "... it is important for the teacher himself to write and to allow students to sense his joy in doing so."

Arvid Johnson, of Wheaton North High School, sent copies of evaluation forms written by her students, Julie Theriot and Debbie Hung. These students felt that high school had provided them with guidance and facilities through the fact that they had writing classes every year. One student commented that "Mr. Meret in particular emphasized writing as something to be enjoyed. Debate and forensics experience taught me to organize my thoughts." The same student went on to comment that she conducted her studies by "reading—anything I could get my hands on." One student commented that her family had provided guidance and encouragement in that "encouragement came only in the form of a standard of excellence in all endeavors."

It is, then, in lovingly seeking the answers to questions for which there are no solutions that we can make our greatest contribution as teachers and humanitarians. If we seem to be in danger of perpetuating the standard of mediocrity sometimes assigned to us by others, it may be because we don't speak out with enough conviction about our purpose and task. Rather than accepting the ill-informed attitudes toward what we do and rather than taking blame for the ill-defined failings of our students, let us make a greater effort to articulate to the public, our students, and, most importantly, each other the fundamental contribution we are making to our students and our culture. Read Boyer's *High School*. Look at John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* (McGraw-Hill, 1983). We have powerful allies in these reports which support us in what we seek: smaller and fewer classes, better materials, more effective in-service training, and writing across the curriculum. Argue with those who don't see the paradox of raising standards and increasing the amount of time in the classroom without doing anything to make teaching more attractive financially. Fight against top-down reform to avoid that giant school board in the state capitol. Fight for school improvement and in-service programs that are on-site, at individual schools.

The NCTE *Essentials of English* reinforces for us that a complete language arts program offers "varied opportunities for the individual to mature intellectually and emotionally, . . . [to] acquire self-sufficiency, [to] work independently in all disciplines, . . . [and to develop] analytical and creative capabilities . . . By contributing in these ways, we hope to expand the capacities of the human intellect and to preserve the tradition of free thought in a democratic society." It is the preservation of the tradition of free thought in a democratic society that ultimately motivates us when we are teaching reading, writing, speaking and thinking.

As a card I received from a former student reminds me, "A peacock that sits on its tailfeathers is just another turkey." (Copyright 1982, Peacock Papers, Boston) Let's spread our tailfeathers and let people know just how important a job we are doing. We still may not find all the solutions, but we will enjoy the seeking ever so much more.

English Education and the New Technocracy

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The past year has been a devastating one, perhaps we should say, an ego-shattering one for many educators. Once again, in the usual cyclical fashion, the educational establishment has been under attack from the seats of power. A blue-ribbon presidential panel has told us that American education is in such a shambles that if it had been saddled on us by some foreign power we would have to see it as an act of tyranny.

The immediate assumption is that educators on all levels have been lax in their responsibilities and that they should do something to put their house in order. Of course educators in their turn point out, and rightly, that the educational system will function quite admirably if adequately supported, and, yes, funded, by federal and state governments. In defense of themselves, however, teachers are not quick enough to point out that many of the most serious problems faced by education are due neither to lack of financial support nor failure from within. It is important that those who would defend our efforts make clear that a big part of our problem is not financial and administrative, but a failure of will — and this on the part of the American public in general.

It is probably true to say that any people gets the kind of educational system that it deserves. And teachers are quick to interpret this to mean the kind of system people are willing to pay for. While this may be true, it is not the only point worth emphasizing. The United States has been remiss in supporting education financially, but it has also been remiss in supporting it spiritually. And largely this is because we have come to believe that education is simply one specialized governmental function like any other — like running the postal service, for example, or the infrastructure. But education is not a technical function among others; it is part of the warp and woof of cultural and social life. When there are problems with education it is inevitably because there are problems with the whole of a nation's life — with our sense of family, with our general attitudes, with our values. If there is an educational failure it is in a large sense an American failure. It is because we don't take our larger educational functions seriously enough.

There are probably numerous manifestations of the widespread public indifference to education. We might pick one or two for examples. One that occurs immediately to me, and I'm sure to countless other teachers as well, is the growing belief on the part of the public that education is the sole province of schools and colleges. We pay enough for these establishments, so the argument goes, why ought they not provide all of the learning that is to be instilled? But it is not true, and has never been true, that education is the sole responsibility of the schools. All sorts of human institutions, and most especially the family, have equally important educational functions to perform. To believe that education is simply a "function" and that the work of its can be blindly handed over to educators is an obviously fallacious and dangerous belief.

And let us consider another fallacy which is a continuing burden on the educational establishment. It is one that has always been with us in America, but also one that becomes exacerbated from time to time, the present certainly being one of those times. It is the notion that education has but one important function, that being career or job training. The only educational functions that should be supported and paid for are those that will "pay off," and get students better paying jobs when they are through with their years in school. Needless to say, an attitude of this sort will have the effect of undercutting the traditional aims of liberal education. It will undermine many of the higher objectives of teachers, and in the end interfere even with their attempts to provide "career" training. In short, as we should all know, these well-intentioned practicalities turn out to be self-defeating in the end.

It is one aspect of this last mentioned problem that I would like to address in this paper. As English teachers we are all aware of the potential dangers to education of the neglect of liberal and humanistic functions of education. But very often we lack the resolve to fight back. After all, we want the whole system of education to work. We want the young to get better jobs, and we want parents and society in general to feel that the system is working. But to get the job done we often find ourselves having to fight back, and this, alas, on numerous fronts.

Well, all English teachers know where the battle lines are drawn because they have to live with them every day. How many times have we encountered the student, or, indeed parent, who aggressively announces that "it isn't really necessary for me to read *Silas Marner*, or *The Return of the Native* because those books aren't going to be of any use to me in my job as a computer programmer or certified public accountant." Well, the teacher certainly has answers to such assertions, although it seems in recent decades the answers get

weaker and weaker, with teachers of subjects like literature and foreign language more and more having to go on the defensive. No longer will the subject matter speak for itself or stand out in all its shining glory.

And the number of areas which seem to need protection and defense seems to grow all the time. As soon as teachers grapple one of them to the mat another one rises to the fore. Let's just stay with a single problem area for a minute as a convenient example. Let's consider the matter of teaching students how to spell — a function of the early school years, as we all know, but one of those nagging little things cropping up throughout the entire educational system (a fair number of graduate students in prestige universities can't spell worth a darn!). In considering this example we are getting pretty close to those proverbial basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Here's the question, though, — at least it's the question one often finds being expressed by students, parents, and, yes, even technically very well trained people. "Is it really all that important to know how to spell? Isn't that just one of those little niceties, one of those things you ought to be able to do, but which isn't really so crucial if you can't." Well, in the old days, teachers usually had the resources to batter down that kind of argument, but it gets progressively harder now to hold one's ground since the ammunition on the other side comes from more and more different directions.

I have a good friend who grew up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn — back in the 1930s it was, and in a tough Italian neighborhood. He remembers attending a pretty unruly school, with a large number of immigrant children, a generally unhealthy ethnic mix. But he has a clear recollection of a half-literate immigrant mother dragging one of her offspring, Johnny, let's say, perhaps we can call him Giovanni, to school by the ear because she had received a note from his teacher proclaiming that Johnny had done a pretty terrible job on the last spelling test. Hauling the frightened little one up to the teacher's desk, the mother extracted a promise from the little one that next time he'd study and learn the correct spelling of all those irrational English words. There was no whimpering and complaining that it was hard for poor Johnny brought up in an Italian household. Nothing of the kind. Johnny was in school to learn how to spell — and many other such things — and Mama was going to be sure that he did.

Now it may well be that Giovanni's mother didn't have the slightest inkling of why spelling was important. Doubtless she didn't even have a shred of philosophical belief to back her conviction. She knew that the teacher thought it was important and that was enough for her.

Well, my friend now lives many miles from Williamsburg, in the snappy suburb of Scarsdale. Doubtless he never expects to see any well-washed suburban matron hauling her offspring before the teacher's desk for failure to do justice to the noble spelling of the English language. If anyone is to be grabbed by the ear it is probably the teacher, for giving Johnny a "B" which might keep him out of the right sort of college. Not that the Mother would try to argue that spelling is not important, it's just that it "isn't all that important." There are other things competing in their importance: it's all a matter of putting things in perspective. Now who is to say that the modern suburban mother isn't right. Maybe she is right after a fashion. On the other hand, the only way that education can survive is by plugging away on the same old high level. Using the mother's argument against her, one can reply that you can let the old standards drip away here and drip away there, but alas, sooner or later you have nothing at all left.

Now I'm not at all certain that I've given the best rendering of a typical kind of argument that a parent might make to show that "spelling isn't really all that important." Perhaps you can think of other ploys or formulations that say the same thing. On the other hand, one of the problems faced by English teachers today is that as soon as they have found a way to combat this or that formulation, another one rises up to take its place. The English teacher must regularly feel like Richard II in his tent on the night before the Battle of Bosworth Field. Sometimes he has to go through the ghost of his every adversary on a single night.

Let's consider another even more recent line that might be put before the English teacher on this little matter of spelling. At the present the impetus to learning how to spell (or at least valuing the skill and holding it in high esteem) is in danger of being swamped by a line of argument that suggests that spelling is really, after all, only a "technical" function, and we live in a specialized world where there are people around who can perform the spelling function when it has to be performed. The boss, after all, has his "secretary," and she knows how to spell. If one writes a book, there are always editors available trained to "fix things up."

Sweep that argument away, and there are still worse ones to deal with. We all know that the last generation has seen the appearance and widespread use of so-called "word processing" machines. The typical high school student does not have them at present, but in another decade or so a goodly number will. Now many of these word processing systems have their "spelling modes" or functions, which is to say that they are equipped with a memory bank containing the correct spelling of most English words. So, yes, the memory is likely

to contain all of the spelling demons or nuisances — words like “ukulele,” or “zyzygy.” Before long the teacher may well be faced with the argument that machines can fix spelling so why go to all that trouble to torture students about it?

Needless to say, there are plenty of wrinkles in the “spelling mode” of these word processing devices. They are, after all, mindless machines. If you write “I received a letter *form* Mr. Smith last week,” the machine will not have sense enough to change form to from, since “form” is a perfectly correct spelling. But, who knows, in another decade such wrinkles may be ironed out and the infallible spelling machine may be available to every citizen. Too, it is said that the Japanese are working on a “voice-activated” word processing device which (it is hoped) will be ready for market in the early 1990s. When such equipment is available, it will be possible to make even more elaborate arguments that spelling is just a “technical” matter, since writing itself will perhaps be seen as a purely technical matter.

To be sure, even the most vigorous and thoroughgoing advocate of downgrading the importance of a subject matter like spelling will seldom make the extreme case for the elimination of instruction in the subject. At least not yet. The argument will invariably run that the subject should be taught, but with the caveat that we don't really need to pursue it with fanatic intensity. Just as long as Johnny learns to spell reasonably well, we ought to be content. True excellence is not needed since it can be provided for by technology. Thus you can settle for second best in a pinch.

The trouble with settling for second best, as I have already said, is that this is precisely how education deteriorates. Education needs to have the best (or at least strive for the best) in all areas, or it slips between the fingers. Even our worst critics of education don't say that we can't do anything in the schools, but that the important old things are not done very well anymore.

But back to the modern technological argument about spelling. How does an English teacher go about answering it? Does he say, “spelling is good for you the way spinach is good for you,” or “learn it because I tell you to”? A little more ambitiously he may try to complain that learning to spell is part of the liberal arts education, or that it is traditional, or that it improves the mind. These things may all be true, and at one time they had force. They may still be asserted today, but it is always an uphill battle to do so. The opponents do not just roll over and play dead, accepting the superior wisdom and erudition of the teacher.

I must admit that in my own dealings with students I try to apply what many may consider an even weaker argument for taking the trouble to learn how to spell. I try to convince students that playing

around with words is fun; that some enjoyment can be gotten from looking into the dictionary to find out about their history, their etymology, their nuances, and, yes, their spelling — how the spelling of words might have changed or evolved over the years.

Well, some students may well humor me when I make this kind of argument even though they don't find it totally convincing. But that's part of the fate of being an English teacher; you're always having to fight some rear guard action. I suppose if I liked I might search around for some heavy artillery to make my case, but I'm not altogether sure that it would be any more effective.

I had a friend who taught American literature, and spent an entire semester telling his pupils about the "genteel tradition" in the literature of New England. On the final examination in response to a question about it he found one of his students writing about the "genteel tradition" in American literature. Well, this was just a spelling error, wasn't it? Just a technical problem? But no, you see, of course it wasn't just a "mere" spelling error as the locution goes. It was a terrible blunder. It proved to the teacher that this student had been sitting through the course all semester either not hearing or not knowing what was going on. He had not committed a "mere" spelling error.

Well, whatever kind of artillery you bring to the front line you are likely to see that the opposition is almost unconquerable. My feeling is that the arguments against excellence in fields like spelling will continue to get stronger as the age of electronic wizardry advances. English teachers will continue to have to fight a rear guard action — as they always have in the past. Which is not to say that we should stand in opposition to the forward march of technology. There is nothing to be gained by attempting to stamp out word processing machines, any more than the Luddites of the early 19th century had anything to gain by smashing the textile machines. We just have to find new ways to keep the little corner of the world accorded to the humanist alive — that is, I should say, new and as yet unrecognized ways — since we have to deal with new and unrecognized enemies generation after generation.

Returning to a point I made earlier, and this is perhaps the bleakest part of my message. It is never going to be sufficient for humanists and English teachers to fight the old noble fights. They *will* do that, at least for the time being. The only real ways to combat subspecialization of effort, technocracy and standardization is to get the general population to see that it is worth the effort to do so. And I doubt that educators and humanists can be expected to assume the whole of this responsibility. The people themselves will have to decide basic questions about the quality of life, whether they want to be bolt-hole professionals or servants of computers. And, yes, it isn't

all that hard or painful to be a servant of a computer — you can still enjoy your backyard barbecue or your Caribbean vacation. In the last analysis the people of any given nation must decide for themselves precisely what kind of lifestyle they want.

So the educator goes on trying to preserve whatever little patches of ground there are, but they need to know, as the larger public must know, that education itself is not an isolated or "technical" function. And since it is not an isolated or technical function, it is not going to be enough to throw more money into it, or identify "superior" teachers. America's educational problems are not mostly ones of supply, ordinance or personnel, but problems of the spirit. Supply, ordinance and personnel are mostly there; it's more a matter of finding new and better ways to support the mission.

Bigger Than Basics

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The recent and various federal commissions' findings on education raise serious questions and suggest possible solutions about the condition of education in the United States today. The questions deal with test scores, preparedness for the future, and competition with the skills of other nations. The solutions include a stress on teaching the "basics," with stricter course requirements and additional homework, tougher college entrance requirements, and better teaching. As is typical in American politics, care must be taken in education not to fight a new war with the strategies of the old.

For instance, stricter requirements are hard to argue against. These are presumed to be the three R's (and the new C). And yet, as society becomes both more aware and open about its domestic wounds (divorce, out-of-wedlock births, abuse of both children and elders, legal and illegal drug abuse and addiction, discrimination in all its ugly forms, suicide, and the general feeling of self-worthlessness), and as we, the people, are increasingly overwhelmed by national concerns (corporate mergers, poverty, unemployment, dehumanized personal and public services, lack of privacy, ecological pollution, rising prices and fixed incomes, international conflicts and intrigues, nuclear misuse, political, business, and labor corrup-

tion, organized crime, and increased dwindling resources), we need to question whether or not basic education today needs to be something more if not different.

If homefront guidance is absent because of one-parent families or economic realities that require both parents to work, who, then, is to teach such things as responsible adolescent relations, parenting awareness and obligations, financial and career planning, assertiveness training, family living, entrepreneur opportunities and realities, social and civic obligations, and basic accountability for preserving and maintaining the fragile earth we have inherited?

Yes, we must stress the basics, but we must be sure to identify all of today's basics first, so that when we say we have done our homework, it means we have done all of our homework. Today's basic education, for survival and the full-growth potential of every individual, is bigger and more complicated than ever before.

Secondly, with a larger base of students with seemingly poorer qualifications admitted to colleges and universities in the late sixties and early seventies, no wonder today's workers and graduates seem less prepared than previous generations. No wonder test scores in the last decade have dropped. But was not the purpose of those admissions two-fold: a recognition that many of America's youth had either been denied or received inferior preparation for college due to numerous discriminatory practices and that equality of opportunity was something educational institutions needed not only to preach, but practice?

It would be folly, at best, to suggest that a mere fifteen years would turn around decades, centuries of discriminatory cultural conditioning. It may be a much longer time than we would like before achievement scores return to previous levels and the broad base of American youth achieve an equality of educational excellence once enjoyed by a smaller lot. However, to tighten entrance requirements now and restrict those who are first starting to realize the power of knowledge and their own potential may undo all of the gains made in educational opportunity and equality.

Lastly, we are advised that teaching needs to be improved. It is true that public educators enjoy a tenure system virtually non-existent in the private sector. It is also true that such a system hinders removal of inferior teachers. Here educators and school boards will have to decide to clean their own houses if they expect credibility from the public regarding quality teaching and needed salary raises to a professional standard.

And yes, more money may make education a financially competitive career. But the simplistic thinking that money will buy anything is merely that. Most teachers are already good teachers. Money

cannot buy the dedication witnessed in classrooms across the country. However, we need to realize that the services of teachers are not requested like those of a lawyer, doctor, or plumber. The educators' fee is hidden in a tax bill. They serve the public. And it is one of the more ignoble aspects of man's nature to see how he treats those who serve him. The public needs to regain its sight regarding the value of education and its guaranteed availability in a democracy as the direct link to a free society.

Regardless, teaching is simple, human interaction. Until a mutually respectful working relationship can be developed between student and teacher (and parent and teacher) around curricula that is meaningful to both, and particularly to the student, and until a reward system for academic achievement is realized that counteracts the expectations of a society now dependent upon immediate gratification and tangible rewards, and until the contributing factors that lure teachers and students alike away from school as an important and exciting place to be are examined and addressed successfully, the status quo in education will prevail with only scattered improvements.

Thus a new dedication to education needs to be more than a return to the way things were; of necessity we first must understand the way things *are* before we ever can hope to alter the way things might and should be.

The dawning of the Age of Aquarius promised a sunrise of hope and change and advancement. We must not let that sun set prematurely by returning to a darker age.

The Implications of Large English Classes

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At the Denver convention the Annual Business Meeting passed a resolution calling for the Council to "establish a task force to summarize existing research on the relationship of workload to teaching and learning" and calling for additional research if needed. The background statement for the resolution noted that "Recent publicized statements on workload have provided contradictory or inconclusive findings; consequently, educational decision-makers attempting to reduce workloads have been unable to justify their actions with supportive documentation."

As of this writing the NCTE Executive Board has not had sufficient time to act upon the resolution, and it is not known how or whether a study on classload will be implemented. Whatever decision is made, though, we who are in the classroom should continue to emphasize the NCTE position that has been in force since 1976 but which was affirmed in the early days of the organization: "that full time English teachers [in secondary schools] be assigned a daily teaching load of no more than 100 students."

Then, too, we who *know* we are facing too many students each day should, whenever possible, be pointing out to our administrators, legislators, and the public-at-large what the implications of overloaded English classes are. We English teachers don't have to have scientific studies at our fingertips to explain to others the difference between 30-35 kids or more in a class as opposed to 15-20. And perhaps many of our patrons don't have to be provided with scientific proof to convince them of the importance of smaller classes, either.

However, the issue of class size must be emphasized to them if they are to realize the implications of teacher load and are to be moved to do something to reduce class sizes.

Provided here are some of the implications I want others to realize. They are unscientific, yet felt-in-the-blood concepts that I've developed simply from personal experiences and observations.

- *Implication:* A teacher of English who faces 30 students in a class period of 50 minutes can, at best, have no more than one-and-

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a-half minutes per pupil for one-on-one instruction during any period. And because of routine attendance-taking and interruptions, the time for each student will probably be less than that.

- *Implication:* The more students there are in a class, the fewer compositions a teacher will assign and mark and grade.

- *Implication:* The greater the number of students in a class the fewer the talks prepared by students for presentation during class.

- *Implication:* The greater the number of students, the less time a teacher will have—and take—for preparing lessons.

- *Implication:* The less time a teacher has for preparation, the lower the quality of the assignments.

- *Implication:* In an overloaded instructional situation, the language arts teacher who attempts to emphasize writing and provide one-on-one assistance during the writing process will be far more tired at the end of the day than the teacher who avoids such a process.

- *Implication:* The larger the number of students in a class the greater the pressure on the teacher to maintain student discipline. (Students in a small class can be disruptive, but the noise level will be lower.)

- *Implication:* The higher the pressure on the teacher to maintain discipline, the more likely it is that the students will sit in straight rows and the teacher will resort to lecture and dictation, supervised reading, commercially prepared materials, works sheets, objective tests—in general, methods and materials devoted to lower-level thinking skills.

- *Implication:* The teacher of large classes who assigns one or more written compositions a week will spend less time on each student paper than the teacher of small classes, and the comments provided on each paper will tend to be more superficial than otherwise.

- *Implication:* The teacher of large classes will spend more time with editing skills than formulation processes when marking student papers.

- *Implication:* The teacher of large classes who assigns weekly written compositions will work nights and weekends—times that other people have free to pursue leisure activities.

- *Implication:* Teachers of overloaded writing classes who assign regular compositions and then assume responsibility for reading and scoring all student papers will reduce their own reading of novels, plays, magazines, etc., and thus reduce their effectiveness in advocating reading to their students and in keeping current with literary, social and political matters.

- *Implication:* Teachers with one or more overload classes and one or two smaller classes frequently find themselves so worn out

from working with the larger classes they have little or no physical and mental energy to expend on their smaller classes.

- *Implication:* In an educational institution in which all teachers of English have no more than four small classes of 20-25 students (or fewer) the English staff will be doubled, the number of English sections and classrooms will be increased, and, accordingly, costs for the program will also rise.

- *Implication:* Smaller classes are generally more intensive, innovative, and/or educationally productive than larger classes.

- *Implication:* Until such time as English teachers publicize such implications and the public is ready to confront them and to pay for smaller classes, English teachers will continue to be slaves to the system or opt for less than satisfactory alternatives—and our educational opportunities and accomplishments will be less than they could be.

To Thine Own Self Be True

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English teachers aren't selfish enough.

After attending the NCTE Convention in Denver, a strange feeling came over me as I was on the plane coming home. The meetings, for the most part, were helpful and a few were exceptional, but the same theme emerged from every session. Perhaps it is best stated in the current NCTE "Call for Program Proposals" by President Stephen Tchudi,

English teachers have become modern-day renaissance people, charged with teaching literature, reading, writing, language, media, interdisciplinary studies, ethics, and even computer 'literacy' to a broader spectrum of students than ever before in the history of the classroom.

I'm exhausted even thinking I do all of that every day in a classroom. Of course, much of this is taught by every good teacher in every building so the English teacher cannot consider himself alone in the war against ignorance and barbarism, but can all of us do all of that?

It is time the teachers of English become selfish. Are we spreading ourselves too thin by allowing all the ills of society to fall on our shoulders and by believing the future depends solely upon our skillful manipulating of young minds? We are all frustrated with the many government and private reports condemning the system of education in the society but we cannot assume we are alone to blame.

The selfish teacher is one who looks at his own best talents as well as his weaknesses and honestly proceeds through the day doing the best he can. He realizes he is responsible for his own well being and in turn will influence all those around him. He cannot allow administrators, politicians, students or colleagues to degrade his confidence in his abilities.

A Florence Nightingale attitude is admirable but hardly realistic. The most memorable teachers of my educational career were those who loved their courses and wanted to share their exuberance for the subject. I'm sure they didn't consider being singularly in charge of protecting America for the future and for democracy. These exemplary educators motivated students with a personal intellectual integrity which amazed and infused everyone with the desire to learn.

Teachers of English have for the past several years spent too much time complaining and assuming too much of the blame, as well as too much of the credit. The pompous attitude that we are the keepers of civilization seems only a justification. By constantly telling everyone how many papers, how many debates, how many yearbooks and how many newspapers we are assigned, we can only sound to the layman like complaining children. We all knew before we got our degrees what would be expected of us; the long hours can't have been a surprise.

In order for the teachers of English to be viable members of the educational community, we must all be selfish enough to admit that we cannot be effective in huge classes; we cannot be effective in classes for which we were not trained; we cannot be effective if we don't realistically consider our own personal weaknesses and strengths, and we cannot be effective if we do not clearly perceive our role in the total educational community.

We have the right to be as happy and as fulfilled as any student in any school. It is time we seriously ponder those rights and redefine our position in the culture.

Needed: A Look at Priorities

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American educators are being told that the spirit of excellence no longer prevails in our educational institutions. Presently, the American public schools are taking a beating in regard to educating our nation's young.

In a recent study of the academic performances of students in ten countries around the world, it was found that the American students ranked number ten—right at the bottom. Interestingly enough, our country ranked number one in educational expenditures. Money seems not to be the problem. How the money is managed and spent is the problem.

If we were to examine the educational programs of the three top-ranking countries, we would find that Japan, Russia, and Germany educate only a select few after the eighth grade. Around the age of thirteen or so, students are channeled into vocational programs or some other type of non-academic program. Only the intellectual "creme de la creme" reaches the high school and beyond. Certainly, it is much easier to attain excellence when one is working only with the gifted or the very bright student. In America, however, everyone is kept in school in the hopes of making each into a scholar.

Constitutionally, the American way has been to educate the masses. No other country has that intent: to educate every person to his/her fullest potential. This is, indeed, a noble aim; however, in actuality, we are not educating everyone to his/her fullest capabilities. We have abdicated our responsibility and, in doing so, we have sacrificed our truly bright students. We have "traded off" excellence for the sake of the least capable. If our country truly desires academic excellence, the same opportunities and monies now provided handicapped and special education students should be provided also for the very able students. It is a paradox, indeed, that a country would funnel millions of dollars into programs for student who can never be expected to solve the problems and ills of society, and yet refuse to deny educational funds for the very bright students who *can* be expected to find the answers to those problems.

Standing squarely in the way of educational excellence is the fear of change. School boards and administrators seek to preserve the status quo. They strive to keep the schools culture-bound, rather than future-bound. An honest appraisal of the inadequacies of our schools must be made; officials need to set aside their own self-

serving interests, and perhaps even suffer a loss of power, so that advances in education can occur. Boards of education and administrators need to encourage a spirit of inquiry, foster an environment of civil dissent, and insist upon a *free* exploration of ideas in order to blow away the cobweb of stagnated beliefs that no longer allows excellence to be pursued.

An education should be a privilege earned through capability and the desire to excel. In a democracy, education should not be forced upon the citizenry. On the contrary, an education should be so attractive that one would not be compelled, legally, to pursue it, but compelled, *personally*, to pursue it! Compulsory education laws, which are absent in many other countries, only support a vast bureaucratic system which, in reality, exists to furnish babysitting services, to keep kids off the streets, or to keep them out of the job market. One can't achieve academic excellence with these hidden aims being the schools' main reasons for existence.

If America wants academic excellence, it needs to re-examine its priorities. The "three R's" are no longer top priorities. In keeping with the schools' aforementioned custodial function, they have been replaced by sports, music, band, cheerleading and drill teams. We must exist for academics if we wish academic excellence.

Alternative schools must be established. Since it appears that our society is less and less a literate society, but instead a video one, alternative modes of learning must be offered. Experts in the field of futurism need to be consulted for educational recommendations. Health experts and special programs are needed also for the offspring of the drug culture who are now entering our schools in mass numbers.

Our young need to see intellectuality as being attractive, honorable, and worthy. A prevailing attitude among many of our nation's young is that it is "uncool" to be bright, and there are even some students who particularly fear being labeled "egghead" or "squid." It is considered great to be a sports hero, but the present attitude seems to be that it isn't right to be bright. This is reinforced further by school officials who allow sports awards to be presented *during* the school day, while honors awards are presented *after* school. The "jock mentality" appears to have made a sweeping victory over intellectualism, not only at school, but in life. Society should not permit this victory to continue, for those whose only talent is to toss a football are not likely to be those who save mankind.

Since teachers are the closest to the educational product, assuming much of the responsibility for that product, thus making them the most important ingredient in the entire educational framework, it stands to reason teachers should receive the highest pay. This,

however, is not likely to occur. Merit pay should be instated and it will undoubtedly aid academic excellence, but merit pay must not be based solely upon an administrator's appraisal of the teacher's competence, since administrators may tend to devalue and "rate down" teachers who express dissenting views. By the same token, if our present system is willing to compensate coaches for sports, it must be willing to compensate spelling coaches, English coaches, algebra coaches, and so on.

The contrived plan to "buy-out" or "bail-out" old, experienced master teachers who require academic excellence is another roadblock to quality education. The challenging, conscientious teacher, who demands perfection, must be kept in the system regardless of age or salary. By the same token, tenure laws that protect the mediocre and inept should be abolished since excellence is not complemented by their existence. America does need teachers who are willing to "knock themselves out."

If a solution to a lack of excellence is sincerely advocated, then those solutions must come from the experts—teachers and the best ones! Teachers' concerns, recommendations, and suggestions for educational improvements must be given attention. Much anxiety about poor scholastic performance, discipline, inflated grades, low academic standards, etc., could be lessened if teachers were allowed to converge in a free and non-threatening way to work toward solving these problems. Teachers must be given *power*.

No longer can society continue to apply band-aids to the gaping wounds of our educational system. It is time for the old to die, and it is time for an educational Phoenix to be allowed to arise from its ashes. Our very survival depends upon it.

Overcoming Roadblocks in the Composition Class

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One day Darlene, a high school junior, hung around until the rest of the class had gone and then said, "You know—you really deserve a hug for the grade you gave me on this paper. I didn't expect it to be that good." So we discussed what made this one a better paper than her earlier ones. Today, after this small taste of success, she is excited about writing. As we know, there are countless roadblocks to excellence in teaching and learning. Darlene has eliminated at least one of her obstacles: a sense of inadequacy. Clearly, both attitudes and pedagogy shape our ability to overcome these roadblocks.

Attitudes held by students and teachers can stand in the way of excellence. One of the most detrimental in students is a negative self-image, an attitude that a willing and persistent teacher can help a student reverse. Furthermore, when students view the teacher as an adversary, their energies produce stress rather than progress. Teachers, on the other hand, who have a condescending attitude toward their students likewise retard students' progress. The feeling that teachers must maintain an authoritarian image is a hindrance in the composition or creative writing class. Finally, resenting the paper work involved in a writing class can affect the teacher's attitudes in all other areas. These attitudes, however, can be dealt with successfully.

One of the first tasks the successful writing teacher will perform is to establish an atmosphere of trust in the classroom. During the first few days of a composition course, I find that students bristle with concern over grades and my expectations. Among college-bound students this is a very real and understandable concern since they fear that their future will be threatened by an unfair teacher. I am convinced that the greatest progress will occur after students learn to trust the teacher and one another. A few simple techniques will move the class in that direction. First of all, learning names is important. We play a name game one of the first days of class to help us learn one another's names as well as something about each individual in the class. Whatever the game selected, the teacher must participate if tensions are to break down. People's names are important to them; consequently, I try to learn them quickly but find, early in the

course, that I must occasionally apologize for an occasional faltering while assuring students that their names are important to me.

A second step in the direction of establishing class members' trust in me is to compliment them for what they do well. This is not easy for me because my expectations are high, and at times I have to search hard for a compliment. However, by starting the course with a few personal writing assignments, I can give praise honestly and often enthusiastically because students tend to write well about their own experiences. A narrative about an incident from their childhood always works well. I not only commend them personally for the strengths in their writing, but I tell the class how much I enjoyed reading the childhood themes (I truly do enjoy them), and I share a few with the class. In fact, when I surveyed my current classes, the childhood writing was the favorite assignment of the majority of students. Praise must be genuine to lay the groundwork for trust.

A third important technique is to generate interaction between student and teacher and among students themselves. Holding conferences helps break down many barriers. A conference may be thirty seconds at a student's desk or five minutes at mine. I have experimented with various methods. Some semesters I have required students to arrange to spend five minutes with me at least once every two weeks. Logistically, this is difficult in the high school classroom, but I have found that I have the best rapport with the students who have met with me in this manner. We use the five-minute meetings for any reason related to the student's writing. Most often the time is given to discussing ways a student might revise a particular paper. I have found, too, that after a few of these five-minute conferences students initiate such talks more frequently than required. Conferences can be held during times when students are doing desk work or when they are doing group work, once the groups are firmly established and are functioning efficiently. We use small groups frequently. We begin by working in partners for a couple of weeks to expand students' comfort zones; then, we expand to small groups of four. Students have input into the formation of groups, and, once established, the groups stay together for the semester. The groups work together on planning and revision of writings. They develop a trust—in most cases—in one another, and as time passes I find them consulting with one another voluntarily.

Finally, in establishing trust between students and myself I use an analytic scale when I evaluate their papers so that they know exactly what they have done well and where they must concentrate their energies. I rarely have complaints about grades. Instead, many students ask what they can do to improve in their weaker areas. The establishment of a trusting atmosphere in the classroom melts away students'

negative self-images and fears of the teacher-adversary, enabling them to apply their energies to what really matters—learning.

Teacher attitudes are more difficult to deal with, particularly when they have been formulated over a long period of time. However, a willingness to read the professional journals and publications and to attend workshops and conferences keeps us open minded and instills the confidence to experiment with new methods. Furthermore, once an atmosphere of trust is established in the classroom, of course, the writing teacher loses any condescending view of students he or she might have had. Work done by modern theorists such as James Moffett, Donald Murray, and Ken Macrorie (to mention only a few) concerning teaching writing indicates that the teacher must become a facilitator or coach rather than an authority standing in front of the room telling. An authoritarian attitude with students in the writing class results in correct, perhaps, but stilted, dull prose from most students. One way to break the ice is to do assignments with the students. Sitting down and writing with the class can be a humbling yet enlightening experience. Writing with them helps me to empathize with students and to realize that what I am asking them to do is not easy. It also helps me to know where I can be of help to them. And, besides, being a teacher-learner makes the task of teaching more challenging and interesting. Telling students how to write will not help them achieve the degree of excellence in writing that nurturing them through the writing process will. It makes the teacher no less of an authority, however, to take a nurturing attitude. In fact, such a teacher needs to be more adept because he/she needs to be prepared to answer any question a student may have about the writing process. Such a teacher is also an authority in human relations.

Teaching composition well is not an easy task. No matter how you look at it, those papers must somehow be evaluated. Students have invested time in the assignment and deserve feedback. Resenting the time involved in this task drains energy that is needed elsewhere. We need to investigate methods for dealing with evaluation of student writing that will reduce the stress. I find that using an analytic scale saves me time. (For evaluation techniques see *Evaluating Writing* by Charles R. Cooper and Lee O'Dell, NCTE, 1977.) Also, concentrating on the positive—the good aspects of a student's writing—and dealing with the problems in small doses saves time in the evaluation process and achieves better results. Students need to know that the teacher cares about their writing and their progress; hence, we need to find ways to evaluate quickly, yet accurately and fairly. To help students achieve excellence in writing, teacher attitudes need to be positive and confident.

With regard to pedagogy, in recent years research has been done investigating the writing process. One roadblock to excellence, certainly, is not keeping up with new ideas in teaching methods. Being unrealistic in our expectations of students and in the amount of time we allow them to complete a writing project is another. Inflexibility in making assignments can also impede progress as can failure to take time to diagnose students' problems and needs.

Keeping up with the research in teaching writing not only presents new methods, but it heightens a teacher's confidence as well. Work done on observing and analyzing the writing process by people such as Janet Emig helps us view student writing realistically. Studies of language development (e.g., Walter Loban's work) show us what students can be expected to achieve in terms of language skills. How do we recognize excellence except through comparative analysis of what students on all levels do? We can learn to be good judges of excellence only by doing our own studies or by reading the studies of others. Studying the research helps us to put our own teaching into perspective.

In developing our curriculum and lesson plans we need to be both realistic and flexible. In our school we have been blessed with academic freedom. Such an atmosphere surely enables excellence in both teaching and learning in that creativity and innovation are not stifled. In my writing classes every assignment has a purpose, all to the end of helping students improve their writing skills. Instead of grammar exercises we work on sentence-combining skills. Instead of my grading their written sentence-combining assignments, we discuss them in class. I try to impress upon students that these assignments are intended to help them with the revising process and that they should attempt to apply the sentence combining principles as they revise. Vocabulary "study" is accomplished through the use of the dictionary or Thesaurus to sharpen word choice before the completion of the final draft. All that we do in the class has some practical application.

My students write frequently. They turn in one assignment each week, as a rule, which they have taken through all the stages of the writing process. We discuss the process so they understand what they are doing. I see no need, with the research available to us today, for the writing process to be some deep, dark mystery to students as it was to so many of us for so many years. In class we practice prewriting techniques such as brainstorming, listing, mapping, and freewriting together until it becomes second nature to do these things at the beginning of an assignment. Students learn that these techniques are tools for the writer just as a hammer is a tool for a carpenter. Sometimes we work on the prewriting as a class, some-

times in small groups, and eventually students work alone to generate ideas.

Once they have some ideas on paper, I give them several days to put them into rough draft form. I feel strongly that for students to write well they need time to mull over and shape their thoughts. I recognize that there are instances when they need to write well in a limited period of time such as for an essay examination, so we practice that kind of writing, too, but I feel that they arrive at the ability to write well impromptu only after they have had some experience at developing their thoughts more slowly.

Once students have a rough draft on paper, we begin work on revision. Much of this work is done in small groups. Students read their work to one another, affirm the strengths of the papers, and suggest changes that would clarify or make the writing more interesting. They need to be coached in this process so that they take a positive and nurturing attitude toward one another and so that they have some guidelines for evaluating one another's work.

After a paper is submitted for evaluation students can revise further if they are not satisfied with the grade; however, I require a brief conference before they proceed with further revision so that they do not waste precious time copying over the same weaknesses and so they do not throw out the good parts of their work. I do not accept a corrected paper as a revised paper. To warrant a better grade, students must either work with the wording and phrasing, reorganize the paper, or expand the paper with additional support where it is thin. Students need to be taught how to revise, and, once they have some tools to work with, many are willing to do so. I have found this method most successful as we reach for excellence in writing.

Finally, the teacher needs to be flexible in making assignments. In my classes we begin with personal writing but ultimately cover a variety of expository modes. I seldom require students to write on a specific topic. More often I give them a context within which to write, allowing them to choose a fitting subject about which they feel comfortable writing. If a student finds an assignment impossible, I ask him or her to propose an alternative. For instance, a young girl whose father recently died told me, when given the childhood assignment, that she could remember nothing about her childhood. After I questioned her for a few minutes, I was convinced that she, in fact, could not remember, so she proposed an alternative that resulted in a nicely written theme. In a writing class the practice, after all, is more important than conforming to an assignment. Flexibility is important if we want to keep our students moving forward and if we want to avoid stifling their writing.

Not all of my students reach excellence in their writing skills. Not all try, but most of them do reach for it and are closer when they finish the course than when they began. Frequently, a student will smilingly tell me the course was the hardest one he/she has taken in high school. The smile, I am sure, reflects the student's pride in accomplishment, and that pride is justified because students in the writing classes bear the burden of responsibility for their own learning. They have to generate the ideas, and that is more difficult than soaking up information that someone else provides for them.

Having had a student winner in the NCTE Achievement Awards in Writing Program, I was asked what I had done to overcome the roadblocks to excellence in teaching English. Above I have listed some roadblocks that I consider significant threats to excellence and have discussed how I have tried to overcome them. But all of this is to no avail without a talented and conscientious student and other teachers who have taught that student before me who, too, have overcome the roadblocks to excellence. Education is a joint effort. Together we shape the lives and skills of our students.

According to Tom, Dick and Mary

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EUREKA

What do students who have recently graduated from high school have to say about the quality of their education? To find out, I first assigned my Eureka College freshman composition classes to read "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" by the national Commission on Excellence in Education. Then I assigned a causal analysis theme: students were to tell if their own high school education had or had not been excellent and to discuss the reasons. Of approximately fifty students, five wrote good themes praising their teachers and schools and saying that their education had been excellent. In addition, one student responded quite irately. He said that he had gone to a first-rate high school, had always worked hard, and had received high grades. The commission had no right to criticize American schools. His two-page composition contained

twenty-three errors in sentence structure, grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Most of my students seemed to feel that their education could have been better. More blamed themselves than their schools and their teachers. Reasons given by these students for the lack of excellence can be divided into half a dozen categories.

No Big Bird: Lack of student motivation was frequently mentioned. Some students seemed to think that the motivation should have been entirely external. These complained that the subject matter was uninteresting, their texts dull, and their classes boring; these students blamed their teachers for failing to motivate them. Others, however, blamed themselves, saying that they had not paid attention in class and had preferred watching television to doing homework.

Jock and the Clowns: Many students reported that, whereas they were somewhat interested in academics in high school, most of their efforts and energy had gone into sports, other extra curricular activities, and just plain fun. When they did decide to study, they were too tired to learn well. One young woman said, "I honestly consider my avid involvement in sports to be the main factor attributing [*sic*] to my lack of a better high school education." Another comment was, "My buddies and I were too busy having fun in high school to care if we learned much." Another stated, "Some of the kids in class loved to clown around, and they were a lot more entertaining than the teacher."

Mickey Mouse: Some students cited courses with little academic content as causing a lack in their education. One wrote, "I learned a lot about cars and machines, but not one thing about physics, chemistry or biology. . . . Now you may be thinking that I went to a large inner-city public school, but I did not. I attended the largest private high school in the Midwest." Still others complained of low standards and lack of homework in academic classes. One said, "Some teachers that have been around many years still give lots of homework, but the majority of teachers just help the students get by. Much of the homework and out-of-class assignments we did weren't [*sic*] relevant to the class." One commented, "Teachers do not want to give you too much homework because, if they do, it makes their job tougher."

High Apple Pie: Closely related to criticisms about lack of high academic standards were those about grade inflation. One student said, "I figured that it was not worth my effort to try if I would receive a grade of C no matter what I turned in." Another commented, "The requirements were so low that a student with an IQ of 40 could pass." A student athlete reported, "Team members were always given good grades to make them eligible." Some students

believed that teachers passed trouble-makers who did no work so as not to have them again the following year and then, to be consistent, had to pass everyone else in the class also.

Lil' Orphan Annie: Some students reflected upon social problems in a thoughtful way. "Because of our frequent moving," said one, "I was in several different schools, which made adjusting very difficult." According to another, "My parents were getting a divorce, and I was too upset to study." In some cases the reaction was more emotional than thoughtful. "I didn't learn because nobody cared if I learned. My family didn't care, and my friends didn't care. Nobody cared."

Low Dough: A number of students were quite aware of salaries, especially as they related to teacher motivation. One said, "Teaching has begun to be thought of as a field not to get into. The pay is low and the benefits are few. Teachers become discouraged with their jobs and begin to put less into them." Still another told of overhearing his teachers: "The central idea of their conversation was, 'What does the administration want for the amount of money they are paying the teacher?' In short, why should they work their tails off to teach something when they are being poorly paid!"

So much for a sampling of the reasons my college freshmen believe tended to prevent excellence in their high school education. Many students who thought that their education was far from excellent did, nevertheless, praise certain teachers who had done an outstanding job against difficult odds. As for ways of improving matters—my students were thankful that I did not assign a problem-solving type of conclusion for this set of themes.

The Question of Quality: A Little Help From Our "Friends"

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About eight years ago on a dreary, cold, rainy winter afternoon, a fellow faculty member trudged into his home after a trying day at school. In front of the tube were about half of his eight kids, arguing, clawing and bickering over what program they were going to watch. Having been through the scene too many times, Bill yanked the cord out of the wall, carried the set into the back yard, and charged back into the house. The kids had seen the old man mad before, so they stood back and watched.

From the closet, Bill grabbed his shotgun, stuffed two shells into the double barrels, barged back into the rain, and unloaded both chambers into the electronic baby sitter. He then loaded all the kids into the family van, drove to the Streator library, got everyone cards and checked out a stack of books. To this day, the silence of the house is broken with the sound of turning pages, but not one click of the channel-changer.

This little tale of media mayhem is recounted not merely as an exemplum. Rather, I offer it as an insight into the question of quality in the English classroom when the teacher seems to be on the end of both barrels. In one national report after the other, we are told how miserably our profession has performed; how woefully lacking our effectiveness has been over the last twenty years; how our energy, retraining, and creativity brought to the classroom have been insufficient; and how we ought to be doing more, although of what, no one seems to have any idea. "More basics," mostly, although those same critics have little idea what they mean by "basics."

On one issue we and the public agree: cooperation, not finger-pointing, is the most likely yellow brick road to literacy. Teachers and parents seldom agree on methods of achieving literacy. On one matter, however, agreement seems clear, even if a solution is not: the television set decreases exposure to and proficiency in language skills: reading, writing and even speaking.

The solution seems simple: remove the tube. Yet that flaunts the obvious: it is not the use of television but its overuse that is the culprit. The ubiquity of the set makes its complete removal from most households not only unlikely but a cause celebre for child

revolt, or at least for a lot of unlivable sulking. Besides, most of us parents (many of us teachers) are as or more addicted than our kids. More reasonable approaches suggest themselves. On the basis of a seven-year experiment with our three boys of seven, eight and fourteen years, let me suggest one tested, workable alternative to blowing the tube to bits.

Since the problem is an inordinant amount of time in front of the set, begin a planned program of watching. My family severely limits its weekly television time. Each weekend three children and Mom and Dad sit down with next week's programming guide and select seven hours of viewing. The choice of seven hours was arbitrary, based on our judgment that an hour of television a day usually covered quality programming and would allow for other domestic and professional obligations. Any number of hours would suffice, of course, but we believe the severe cut from the forty-hour to a seven-hour television week is a good way to go almost cold turkey.

This may strike you as an invitation to domestic murder. The first few times through the process were difficult, but the benefits ultimately far outweighed any initial difficulties. Our first discovery should have been obvious in the planning stages: family communication was improved by everyone reading about, discussing, and selecting programs.

Second, we have found that the children have developed a shrewd ability to recognize quality programs. With indiscriminate viewing, they watched uncritically all kinds of mental mush. When they had to use viewing time wisely, they developed a sense of judgment and spent their viewing time wisely. We no longer hear the roar of "The Dukes of Hazard" but often hear the roaring rapids in National Geographic and other specials. Seldom do the kids waste viewing time on Saturday morning cartoons.

A corollary developed out of this discovery. We found that we use good programs to help the children cultivate interest in other fields of learning. For example, our eldest son has read through all of the "Little House on the Prairie" books and has an enduring interest in the American western movement as a result of the television exposure. The eight year old grabs every book he can find on knights and chivalry as an outgrowth of an NET special on castles. All of the kids are interested in science fiction and astronomy because of the "Cosmos" series, and are developing an interest in ecology and biology through viewing the "Nature" programs. Clearly commercial television can be used to enhance learning and literacy, but only if it is used discriminately AND followed up by parental involvement.

Third, reading, writing, and other creative activities around the house have increased dramatically. Even though we have always read

to and with the children, their motivation to read has jumped under the rules of our viewing system. The first and second graders read at least three grade levels above the norm for their age group on the Iowa reading test, and both have budding pen pal exchanges with former classmates.

The establishment of such a system is fraught with problems. First, all members of the family must abide by the terms of the agreement. Parent TV-aholics cannot sneak in a late hour of "The Johnny Carson Show" and expect the children to be happy with the hypocrisy. Parents cannot make amends for such violations of the policy by adding on an hour for the kids. Just like alcoholism, one harmless drink from the TV-bottle leads to another, and soon everyone is back to media inebriation.

On the other hand, a failure to be flexible and reasonable can collapse the system. If you realize that you missed a special program when combing through the program guide for the coming week, add on that eighth hour of viewing when it can benefit the family. Adding an hour here or there within reason to compensate for oversights will keep the system workable and alive. But restraint is necessary; adding viewing time is just too easy.

Equally important is what we call "the replacement principle": parents must provide alternatives to the missing television hours, especially in the early stages of the project. This is probably the most difficult element in this entire system because it often requires a severe change in parental-child relations—the shift from time together to quality time together. Just turning the kids away from the set encourages much begging, cajoling, and finally giving in to the old tube routine. We began by reading more to the children, planning short trips to parks, encouraging drawing and other art and music projects, helping them write to their friends and grandparents, taking them to the library, and even making trips to the shopping mall (not the best replacement, just an easy one in moments of panic).

Teachers can be both helpful and helped by this approach. First, classes are often given television assignments, such as nature or historical specials, children's programs, and programs based on literary works. By telling a child's teachers about your home viewing policy, you can gather suggestions from them about programs which help you select shows. Second, once teachers hear about your method, they can guide more students to quality programming as part of classroom activities, generating reports and projects from a medium so central to their students' lives yet so often scorned by teachers. Thus the children, with parental and teacher assistance,

can be guided to good viewing, to criteria of judgment about television, and to constructive use of the medium.

Human beings find it easy to blame others for their short-comings. Teachers blame parents for not creating an environment in which learning can be accomplished, and especially point at the omnipresence of the television set and the attendant lack of reading, writing, and other creative activities in the home. Parents complain that teachers seem to expect a family to change completely its lifestyle to facilitate learning. Throwing out the television is simply unreasonable to most people.

This approach to television offers a middle path: parents and teachers cooperating in order to benefit both the children and themselves. Students and parents can still watch their favorite programs while encouraging discrimination, planning, and aesthetic development. The extra time away from the tube can be channeled into family activities which open up new worlds of experience, creativity, and intimacy. Yet by setting some hourly limits, family members slowly wean themselves from television addiction. Most of us just cannot throw out a member of the family.

Let's face it: most of us don't have Bill's courage. Or his shotgun.

Two Specific Suggestions

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People who do not teach school seem to hear all the answers for how to improve education. They haven't asked me, but I have a couple of answers of my own: reduce class size and disconnect the public address system. For the sake of argument, I have outlined the components of these two problems and offered a viable solution to each — just in case anyone ever bothers to ask me!

CLASS SIZE

PROBLEM:

The greatest handicap to effective writing instruction is the excessive work load that English teachers carry.

COMPONENTS:

Writing is the only way to improve writing skills.

Writing must be followed by constructive criticism.

Evaluation of one average essay takes 8.6 minutes.

Evaluation of 25 essays takes 3.5 hours.

For a student load of 150, evaluation time for one writing assignment is 21.5 hours.

Evaluation of term papers takes 30 minutes per paper; for 150 papers, 70 hours.

Large classes encourage anonymity and a lack of individual nurturing vital to development of skills.

Large classes dehumanize the learning process.

Large classes reduce student opportunities to learn.

Large classes encourage mediocrity: students do only enough to get by.

English teachers historically have carried the heaviest loads in extracurricular school responsibilities (yearbook, class sponsor)

ALTERNATIVES: Reduce English class loads for writing instruction.
Have small writing classes and large literature classes.
Have lay people to help grade papers.
Reduce extracurricular activities for English teachers.
Provide a period in the day for grading papers.

SOLUTION: Reduce English class loads to meet NCTE specifications (25 per class or 100 per day). Writing is best taught with the literature, not apart. Teachers need to grade the papers; aides are not so effective. (Writing is also recognized as the best way to teach reading and therefore should not be separated from the reading.)

POLICY: The Board of Education recognizes that English, the only course required for all 12 years of school, is basic to all learning and accepts the responsibility of providing conditions conducive to mastery of communication skills. In view of the impending writing com-

- petency test, teachers of English shall have no more than 25 students per class or 100 per day, a workload endorsed by James B. Conant and NCTE.
- RULES:** No English class will be larger than 25.
Total English loads will be 100.
A period shall be designated for grading essays.
Students will be assigned at least one essay per week.
- EVALUATION:** Smaller situations will create better personal relationships, less bureaucracy, more job satisfaction, more student satisfaction and participation, and better personnel usage. Teachers will use more variety of method, more individualized instruction, and more creative and divergent assignments. Students will have greater regard for each other, function better in group work and learn more in smaller classes.

PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM

- PROBLEM:** The PA system is a deterrent to quality education.
- COMPONENTS:** Concentration on the lesson is broken.
Thinking in the writing process is interrupted.
Testing concentration is disturbed.
Films are interrupted.
Speeches, reports, and performances by students are spoiled.
Students infer that everything else is more important than the learning process, such as class rings, Susie's lunch, John's car lights, club information, etc.
Frequency of interruption conditions students to disregard announcements.
Discipline problems result from disruptions to flow of class instruction. Class has to be resettled.
Impact of precious moments of catharsis or enlightenment are lost — same effect as commercial interruptions to suspense on television.

Noise level is nerve-shattering, chaotic, and confusing.

Reception is often poor.

- ALTERNATIVES:**
- Have no PA announcements other than life-saving emergencies.
 - Have one specified time of day for all announcements to be made.
 - Have a daily bulletin of announcements that can be read and/or posted in each room.
 - Have a bulletin board specifically for club announcements.
 - Have individual messages hand delivered by office assistants.
 - Have no PA systems in the schools.
 - Use a bell system for emergencies.

- SOLUTION:**
- The best solution appears to be to prohibit the use of the PA system except in life-threatening emergencies or when the principal has a message of vital concern to the entire student body. All other announcements should be printed on a daily bulletin to be distributed to each homeroom where it can be read and posted.

- SPECIFICATIONS:**
- Since students know about their club activities (if they don't, they should take responsibility)
 - Since the entire student body should not be interrupted by a message directed to one student (car lights)
 - Since interruptions to oral presentations, films, tests, and lessons render them ineffective
 - Since the noise level and poor reception of the PA system is in part the reason students use the break to socialize, not even listening to the announcements
 - The PA policy shall now read:

- POLICY:**
- Because the school board is dedicated to quality education and recognizes the detrimental effects of interruptions to the learning process, efforts are being made to maintain an environment conducive to learning. The major source of interruption in the

schools is the public address system. Therefore the PA system shall no longer be used for daily announcements. Other arrangements shall be made for communication of information and for delivering personal messages.

RULES:

The PA system is not to be used for any announcements other than life-saving emergencies or announcements of significance deemed mandatory for the entire student body.

A. The principal only shall decide which announcements merit school-wide attention.

B. The principal alone shall make such announcements to the student body.

Announcements concerning club or class activities shall be placed on the daily bulletin and/or on a designated bulletin board.

Messages to individuals are to be hand delivered by office assistants.

EVALUATION:

Measure time-off-task created by PA interruption and compare to time-off-task with specified interruptions.

Observe changes in student involvement in class activity, attitude toward learning, and achievement.

Though the problems in education are multiple, relief from these two would make a significant change in the quality of education.